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ABSTRACT

The special needs and characteristics of pubescent adolescents led to the creation of junior high schools around the turn of the century, but these watered-down senior high schools have not provided a satisfactory transition between childhood and young adulthood. The middle school movement has not remedied the situation. It has provided programs hard to distinguish from those of traditional junior high schools in a disorganized welter of various grade groupings. While the varying rates of cognitive development and sexual maturation among 10-to-14-year-olds serve as rallying points for those in the middle school movement, the practical reasons for restructuring school systems are more often related to population shifts, budgetary pressures, and court orders, and little effort is made to account for developmental phenomena. One factor in this failure is the lack of an adequate research base to underpin the claims of middle school proponents that a new type of education is necessary. What the middle school movement now needs are hard-headed theoreticians, researchers, and policy analysts to articulate the purposes, functions, and practices that can result from the implementation of effective middle school programs. (Author/PGD)

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WHAT IS THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MOVEMENT REALLY ABOUT?*

by

Joan Scheff Lipsitz

*Paper prepared for the American Association of School Administrators' third annual Summer Instructional Leadership Conference, Chicago, July 6-9, 1980.

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WHAT IS THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MOVEMENT REALLY ABOUT?*

Joan Scheff Lipsitz

Specialized schools for young adolescents are not new in the history of American schooling. In the 1880's and the first decade of the 20th century, various pressures converged to lead to the junior high movement. For instance, the National Education Association Committee of Ten, formed in 1892, recommended reorganization from an 8-4 plan to a 6-3-3 plan because of its concern that there was not enough time in four years to complete a satisfactory secondary school program.[1] There were social concerns spurring the junior high movement that went beyond the quality of the secondary school curriculum. G. Vernon Bennett, the City Superintendent of Schools of Pomona, California, also a lecturer in education at the University of Southern California, wrote in 1919 that societal demands to solve social problems made the 8-4 organization untenable. These demands included asking the schools to stop the dropout rate (called "leakage") in the seventh through tenth grades; preparing students vocationally for "suitable and worthy occupations"; shortening the period of preparation for skilled vocations so that men could become self-supporting at an early age; and checking "the physical, mental and moral evils that accompany and grow out of adolescence."[2] The "leakage" rates were serious, estimated at 60% in the senior high years. By beginning a secondary school program earlier, it was hoped that the schools could provide a bridge between the elementary and secondary levels, thereby reducing the dropout rate -- and for those non-academically inclined students, there would be the vocational training necessary for job preparation.

The vocational and social class emphases were expressed in rhetoric different only in vocabulary from our present rhetoric about dropout rates and welfare rolls.

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[1]Donald Eichhorn, "The School," Toward Adolescence: The Middle School Years (Chicago, NSSE, 1980), p. 56.

[2]G. Vernon Bennett, The Junior High School (Baltimore: Warwick and York, 1919), pp. 2-3.

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In addition, there was a suspicion of pubertal students that, while more openly expressed then, is a theme that is with us to this day. The junior high school, it was hoped, would check the evils of adolescence, including "looseness," "shamelessness," "exercising adult desires," disobedience to parents, overstudy, fright, "perverted sex habits as self-abuse," "frequenting moving picture houses," and that whole litany of woes that every adult generation calls down upon the heads of adolescents. [3]

Arguments were also made on the basis of what would now be called "cost effectiveness"--the more economical utilization of school plants and special teachers, the use of outgrown high school buildings unsuited to elementary schools, and the growth of population in cities. Administrators cited reasons that are familiar to us today: providing educational opportunity, relieving congestion, utilizing old high school buildings, increasing retention rates, providing better education for the "transitional" years, providing earlier differentiation, and introducing prevocational work earlier.[4] The main themes of the period can be summarized easily: segregating adolescents from younger children during their "peculiarities," sorting-out the vocational from the academic students, and eliminating "leakage."

By the 1930's, other themes emerged which stressed the special psychological needs of preadolescents and early adolescents. Arguments for the junior high stressed the uniqueness of the organizational unit in terms of its methods and materials, thereby meeting the changing nature of pupils as they passed from prepubescence through pubescence.

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[3]Bennett, pp. 6-7.

[4]Thomas H. Briggs, The Junior High School (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920), p. 34.

Where are we today? The "leakage" problem is not as severe as it was in the beginning of the century, but it has never been claimed that the transitional junior high school turned the trick, nor are we content with the current 20% dropout rate. The career education movement of the past decade attests to the failure of the prevocational programs that were so highly acclaimed at the beginning of the junior high movement. Complaints about the lack of articulation between the elementary and secondary levels continue unabated. While no one will come out and advocate the segregation of young adolescents from other children in order to protect elementary students from the "peculiarities" and "evils" of adolescents, we certainly are bombarded with statistics that tell us that, where school violence, vandalism, and peer pressure are concerned, junior highs have special problems that make us irrationally uneasy about merging the age group with either younger or older students. And while no one will openly applaud junior highs for sorting students out according to ability and social class, these are functions we know are performed at this level of schooling.

One "advantage" that was cited in the early literature on junior high schools has become a bitter but enduring heritage: in the junior high school, secondary education is begun earlier, in a watered-down version of the senior high curriculum, in schools staffed predominantly by secondary school teachers and administrators -- JUNIOR high school in the root sense of the term.

As Eichhorn points out, two fundamental aspects of the early junior high school became the pillars of the junior high movement. First, the junior high school is an integral part of <u>secondary</u> (not elementary or intermediate) education. Second, the unique needs of young adolescents create a need for a <u>transitional</u> level of schooling. In the 1960's the middle school movement "erupted as a protest against the program, not against the concept, of the

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[5]Eichhorn, p. 57.

junior high school."[5] Educators in the middle school movement argue, however, that while "transitional," the middle school must be neither an integral part of secondary education nor of elementary education, that this definition as a "junior" division of secondary schooling has led to a lack of identity and recognition, inadequate preparation of teachers, and an instructional program incompatible with the needs of the students.[6]

"What is the middle school movement really about?" Having taken a quick look at the history of specialized schools for young adolescents, I would like now to look at the status of schooling for the age group at present, then at the aims of the movement in terms of early adolescent development, and the stumbling blocks that are preventing the middle school movement from taking hold as the educational revolution that so many educators hoped it would become.

There are 14,349,000 10-to 13-year-olds and 8,100,000 14-to 15-year-olds in this country, or almost 22½ million 10-to 15-year-olds. Where do these young adolescents go to school? In North Carolina in school year 1978-79, there were 34 different grade combinations of schools including grades 6 and/or 8, composed of only grade 7, and excluding K-6 and 1-6 (those schools that are obviously elementary schools). As of December 21, 1979, there were over 4,000 junior highs, grades 7-9 in this country; 3,662 comprehensive schools, grades 7-12; 3,070 middle schools, grades 6-8; 2,628 schools grades 7-8; and 1,024 middle schools, grades 5-8. A 1977 survey indicated that the number of middle schools, defined as schools serving at least three grades, no more than five grades, and including grades 6 and 7, had quadrupled since 1967. The survey also found that middle schools were no more distinguished in program from junior highs, or even from high schools, than in 1967.[7] What we find, then, is a disarray of grade

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[6] Ibid.,

[7] Kenneth Brooks, "The Middle School -- A National Survey," Middle School Journal 9, no. 2 (May 1978): 6-7.

organization and a continuing lack of definition in middle-grade schooling.

Members of the middle school movement are proponents of schools for young adolescents that are responsive to the developmental characteristics of 10-to 14-year-olds. What are these characteristics that are distinct enough to call for a specialized school organization?

Early adolescence is a time of growth and change unique in human experience. Young adolescents pose a unique problem for educators. The central characteristic of this age group is its diversity, caused by extreme variations in the rates of physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. There is no age group that is as variable in the entire continuum of schooling. Policies and techniques that are effective with other age groups are defeated daily by this one central fact of intermediate school life: variability. Many observers see age-graded, departmentalized, lock-step school organization as ill-suited to the developmental diversity of this age group. This is at the core of the middle school movement: an attempt to be institutionally as well as personally responsive to the extreme developmental diversity of 10-to 14-year-olds.

Intellectually, adolescence is an exhilarating time in human development because many young people acquire the capacity to think abstractly, to understand theories, theorems, values, metaphors, to think about thinking. Many do not. Middle school proponents argue that the junior high curriculum is too abstract for the vast majority of students who are not yet ready for and who are in fact turned off by the rapid-fire, abstract courses of the secondary level. They argue that since most of the students are still functioning at the Piagetian concrete level of operations, the curriculum needs to provide for recapitulation and deepening of skills already acquired rather than the acquisition of new skills. At the very least, it must meet the diverse learning needs of this population of students rather than being prescribed by grade level with disregard for students' intellectual and social maturity.

Physically, early adolescence is marked by the adolescent growth spurt, the appearance of secondary characteristics, and the onset of puberty, which has occurred 4 months earlier every decade since the beginning of record-keeping in Scandinavia in the mid-19th century. The middle school movement, while insisting that schools for 10-to 14-year-olds are too advanced intellectually for most of their students, also insists that these students are physically approximately two years in advance of the students for whom the junior high school was designed in the early 1900's. Sexual maturity, the restlessness that comes with the growth spurt, and self-conciousness about physical change are all phenomena that middle school advocates have become responsive to, but which most schools routinely ignore or deny.

There are many social and emotional changes that young adolescents and the adults who work with them must adjust to. The middle school movement argues for giving students more control over their learning, helping them to learn to exercise responsible choice, giving them more areas for achievement and competence than the strictly academic and the competitively athletic, allowing the peer group to flourish rather than structuring the school to deny its existence or engage in constant combat with it, giving support to a temporarily fragile sense of self-esteem, and creating opportunities outside as well as within the school walls to make short-term, meaningful contributions to the community.

Eichhorn, in reviewing different models for middle schools, finds three common elements:

> Each model provides for acquiring essential learning skills in a sequential and individual manner. This aspect is in clear response to the diverse achievement levels, cognitive styles, and varied competencies that characterize learners at this stage.... Another common element in the models deals with the interrelationships of knowledge. Emphasis is placed on common learnings without regard to the constraints of the various disciplines. There is a recognition that presenting skills and concepts in a practical problem-solving context will enhance learning.... A third dimension in each model is personal development. There are provisions for guidance and counseling through advisory programs, curriculum, and specialized help. Awareness and understanding of pubertal change and its

implications for peer relationships are emphasized. Elective and activity programs permit students to explore their interests.[8]

Another proponent of middle schools, Paul George, says that "the k-8 elementary school, the 7-12 high school, even the 7-9 junior high school have failed to keep the middle years from becoming the 'Bermuda Triangle' of education. We need something different -- a new school for the middle." The essentials of this unique school for a unique period of life, according to George, are: an advisor-advisee program, interdisciplinary teacher organization, skills through exploration, block scheduling, team areas, and interest-based activities.[9] The list is similar to Eichhorn's and to that of many other adherents of the middle school structure. What is central is an attempt to make schools for young adolescents developmentally appropriate for their clientele, the young people in the schools.

"What is the middle school movement, really?" is the title that was assigned to this talk by the American Association of School Administrators. The middle school movement is made up of well-meaning, sensitive people who, unlike many of their colleagues in education, really like young adolescents and attempt to be responsive to their developmental needs. The best of these people attempt to match young adolescents in their vitality, creativity, and sensitivity to change, and not in their egocentrism and defensiveness.

"What is the middle school movement, really?" I believe it is naive. It has failed to take into account major stumbling blocks that are inherent in the dynamics of school change and in policy issues that impact on schools, particularly at the middle grades.

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[8]Eichhorn, p. 69.

[9]Paul S. George, "What is a Middle School -- Really," pamphlet produced by Teacher Education Resources, Gainesville, Florida, 1979.

First, while the numbers of "middle schools" have increased dramatically in the past decade, the numbers that have changed programmatically from a junior high curriculum are few. Most middle schools in this country are watered-down versions of senior high schools. The secondary school mentality has been moved down one or two grades. Reasons for shifting to so-called middle schools have more to do with population shifts, court orders, declining enrollments, budgets, and other demographic and administrative pressures than with developmental phenomena. The middle school movement has not had the power to separate itself philosophically in the public's mind, and even in many educators' minds, from middle-grade education as a whole.

I would submit that this failure stems in part from the very basis of the middle school movement, which, while emphasizing the uniqueness of young adolescents, insists upon its "transitional" nature. At the heart of our societal failure to define programs and policy for this age group is this kind of woolly-mindedness. Early adolescence is no more transitional than toddlerhood or middle age or infancy or old age. When we call it "transitional," we allow ourselves and others to define it in terms of the constraints of what comes before and what will follow. When something is in transition between two points, it lacks an integrity of its own. It exists merely to get from the first point to the second. It does not require definition in and of itself. The very term for this age group coined by the middle school people, "transescence," aside from sounding to the lay public like a sexual perversion, emphasizes the transitional nature of this time in life -- transition into adolescence. When something is transitional, it is politically very vulnerable. If an age group is in transition between elementary and secondary schooling, it can be grouped with either of the two when the chips are down. That is one reason that we have those 34 different grade organizations for young adolescents. They have no claim to a time of their own. They lack the firm identity that they must

have if they are to become less politically vulnerable to demographic changes and all the other political and social phenomena that make us define schooling for the age group to satisfy administrative convenience, regardless of developmental imperatives. What I am proposing is that it has been politically naive to insist upon uniqueness and transition at the same time: the message about uniqueness has been lost.

Second, schools for young adolescents are caught between two conflicting approaches to learning which now need to be identified, debated, and resolved. I don't think that proponents of middle schools have acknowledged the theoretical tensions inherent in schooling for the age group. They must become a lot tougher theoretically than they now are. Listen to a few quotations from David Ausubel:

> Such theorists as Bruner, Gagné, and I not only agree that the learner's acquisition of clear, stable, and organized bodies of knowledge is the major long-term objective of education, but also insist that these bodies of knowledge, once acquired, constitute, in their own right, the most significant independent variable influencing the meaningful learning and retention of new subject matter...[10]

> I view knowledge as largely a substantive (ideational) phenomenon, rather than as a problem-solving capability, and I regard the transfer functions of cognitive structure as applying more significantly to reception learning than to problem solving in the typical classroom situation...[11]

> Despite the strident assertions on the part of discovery enthusiasts, most classroom teachers still appreciate that verbal exposition, supplemented where necessary by concrete-empirical props, is actually the most efficient way of teaching subject matter and leads to sounder and less trivial knowledge than when students serve as their own pedagogues...[12]

> It is during the period of transescence that the transition from concrete to abstract cognitive functioning typically begins to occur in cultures such as our own. That is, pupils become increasingly less dependent on the concurrent availability of concrete-empirical props in relating new abstractions and abstract propositions to their existing cognitive structures...These...developments during the junior high school years have at least two significant implications for the design of instruction. First,

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[10] David P. Ausubel, "Enhancing the Acquisition of Knowledge," Toward Adolescence: The Middle School Years (Chicago: NSSE 79th Yearbook, 1980), p.235.

[11] Ibid., p.239.

[12] Ibid., p.247.

> many pupils become ready for a new type of expository teaching in which examples drawn from concrete experience are used primarily for purposes of illustrative clarification, that is, to enhance the acquisition of truly abstract meanings only on those occasions when particularly difficult or unfamiliar concepts and propositions are introduced. This role of concrete examples contrasts sharply with instructional practice in the elementary school years, when such examples are routinely used to make possible the acquisition of the intuitive meanings characterizing school learning during that period.
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> Second, subject matter can now be meaningfully assimilated in greater depth both (a) because the time-consuming presentation of concrete-empirical props can be circumvented in most instances of reception learning and (b) because the greater number and more abstract and inclusive nature of higher-order concepts and propositions in the learner's cognitive structure make possible the assimilation of a much wider array of differentiated facts and subconcepts.[13]

The middle school movement lacks theorists to pit against the power of theorists like Ausubel. Eichhorn's arguments have already been presented. Toepfer, translating the findings of Herman Epstein about brain growth research, argues against everything that I have just quoted from Ausubel. Epstein has found that "in perhaps 85 percent of all youngsters between ages 12 and 14, the brain virtually ceases to grow."

> The prediction here would be that it is relatively more difficult to initiate novel intellectual processes in the middle grades years than in periods both preceding and following this period. Another aspect of this prediction is that it should be characterized far more by maturation in already initiated and learned cognitive skills than in acquisition of new skills...Emphasis on affective and psycho-motor aspects of learning might well receive increased attention and opportunity during this slow brain growth period...Middle grades programs must (a) discontinue the mass introduction of novel cognitive skills to middle grades students who do not have such readiness; (b) present new cognitive information at the existing skill level of students; and (c) work to mature exisiting cognitive skills of middle grade learners.
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> The holistic education of the emerging adolescent will also require a greater emphasis upon learning experiences based as closely as possible upon youngsters' interest centers during this plateau period...[14]

The argument that Toepfer makes is that the biological data from Epstein's research "provides a validated neuroscience framework in which educators can have confidence."[15]

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[13] Ibid., pp.249-50.

[14] Herman T. Epstein and Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr., "A Neuroscience Basis for Reorganizing Middle Grades Education." Educational Leadership vol. 35, no. 8 (May 1978): pp.657-8.

[15] Ibid., p.659.

In the work of learning theorists like Ausubel and middle school proponents like Eichhorn and Toepfer, we have two conflicting theories. Ausubel's is traditional and generally accepted, whatever its merits and faults. The work of one researcher on brain growth, not yet validated, is a slim base on which to ask communities to restructure their school programs. The middle school movement has moved ahead of the research base it needs if it is to gain respectability within the academic community and the confidence of policy-setters and educators who work on the firing line every day with a difficult population of students. I am not discounting or discrediting the movement; rather I am arguing that what they advocate comes from the best of what we know in our day-to-day encounters with young adolescents in schools. They are naive to think that this is enough to change policy. Theory formulation and research are desperately needed.

Finally, the middle school movement has failed to address major policy issues that school people must be concerned with if they are to gain credibility, in fact to survive, in the world outside the schoolroom, and as it impinges on the schoolroom. For instance, the middle school movement is predominantly made up of middle class, white educators who are training middle class, white prospective teachers in predominantly middle class, white communities. To be viewed as irrelevant in the major urban schools and among minorities in this country is to be not only politically naive, but suicidal. Based on my own experiences both as a teacher of young adolescents and as a program associate at the Learning Institute of North Carolina where I ran many workshops for teachers and administrators, I would say that most parents of minority students would agree with Ausubel and want their children to attend a school structured on his theories of learning. Unless the middle school movement can articulate its positions in ways that answer these parents' concerns about their children's

academic achievement and vocational preparation, it cannot achieve the political power to effect programmatic change.

There are other pressing policy issues that the middle school movement must address if it is to advocate successfully on behalf of young adolescents. Examples of these are juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy prevention, school discipline, competency testing, sex equity, after-school care, and youth employment. A survey of articles and speeches by members of the National Middle School Association reveals almost no attention paid to these pressing social issues. While team teaching, block schedules, house plans, and the like are important for the internal workings of a school, they are not enough to give a rationale, to create a theory, and to define a research agenda, for a distinct, specialized school unit for an age group. The failure to address and define these issues vigorously is similar to the adoption of the word "transescent": it shows an insularity from the world outside the schoolhouse door that is damaging to the middle school movement. Sensitivity to personal development is a necessary but not at all sufficient prerequisite for changing schooling for young adolescents. When the middle school movement meshes developmental responsiveness with clearly articulated responses to the "killer" policy issues that educators must address, it will be a powerful agent for young adolescents.

ASCD's working group on the emerging adolescent learner issued a statement in 1975 that certain questions remain to be answered: "What are the identifying purposes, indeed the underlying rationale, for the existence of the American middle school? What should its programs be -- curricular, instructional, and organizational-administrative?

"If answers are not forthcoming to these questions, the middle school may flounder, remaining little more than a name and an assemblage of grades, with

little else to identify and distinguish it."[16] There are some good middle schools in this country, and there are some excellent people running them and working in them. What members of the middle school movement now need are hard-headed theoreticians, researchers, and policy analysts to articulate cogently, for the education community and beyond, the purposes, functions, and practices that can result from their intuitions and dreams.

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[16]"The Middle School We Need: A Report From the ASCD Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner" (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975), p.1.